(De)politicising the local:

The case of the Transition Towns movement in Flanders (Belgium)

Anneleen Kenis* and Erik Mathijs

Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, KU Leuven, Belgium

*Corresponding author. Email: Anneleen.Kenis@ees.kuleuven.be. Postal address: Anneleen Kenis, Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, Celestijnenlaan 200E - bus 2409, 3001 Heverlee, Belgium.

This is a draft (pre-print) version of an article which is currently in press and will soon be published in 'Journal of Rural Studies'. Check the following website for the final, published version: http://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-rural-studies/

(De)politicising the local:

The case of the Transition Towns movement in Flanders (Belgium)

Abstract

As a reaction against global problems such as climate change and peak oil, localisation movements gathered renewed momentum during the last decade. Prominent amongst these is Transition Towns, a movement which advocates the development of resilient local communities to deal with these challenges in an adequate way. On the basis of extensive qualitative research of the movement's rise in Flanders (Belgium), this article studies the way Transition Towns represents the local. It shows that the movement is vulnerable for what has been called the 'local trap', and argues that the latter should actually be conceived as a post-political trap. The representation of the local is depoliticised when it conceals the fact that it is always a hegemonic construction which inevitably entails exclusions and the exercise of power. Drawing on post-foundational political theory, this article not only provides a novel interpretation of Transition Towns, but also aims to recast the ongoing localisation debate by showing that post-politics represents a fundamental problem for it. At the same time, however, the political can never be completely abolished, but always comes back with a vengeance. This ambiguity and complexity are central to this article's analysis of how Transition Towns deals with the local and the political.

Keywords: localisation, community, climate change, post-politics, democracy, Transition Towns, the political

1. Introduction

1.1. The emergence of the Transition Towns movement

Confronted with globalisation and global environmental problems, several contemporary environmental movements, particularly grassroots movements, consider the question of localisation

a central issue again.[1] Local systems, primarily local food systems, are believed to be crucial for overcoming the current environmental crisis. Moreover, they would also enhance human health and the socio-economic welfare of the local inhabitants (Born and Purcell, 2006; Sonnino, 2010).

One of the most influential contemporary localisation movements is Transition Towns, which after emerging in the UK in 2005, spread quickly around the world, establishing its presence in Flanders (Belgium) in 2008.[2] The movement attributes paramount importance to building resilient local communities as a strategy to avert the twin problems of climate change and peak oil (Hopkins, 2008a). As Ben Brangwyn and Rob Hopkins (2008: 10) state in the *Transition Initiatives Primer*:

> "*Given the likely disruptions ahead resulting from Peak Oil and Climate Change, a resilient local community - a community that is self-reliant for the greatest possible number of its needs - will be infinitely better prepared than existing communities with their total dependence on heavily globalised systems for food, energy, transportation, health and housing*".

Local food provision (Pinkerton and Hopkins, 2009), but also local energy and currency systems are crucial aspects of this endeavour (North, 2010b). The movement tries to realise them through positive, constructive and cooperative actions: optimism, pro-activity and inclusion are core values of its approach.

The Transition Towns movement is not a small movement. By July 2013, 469 localities (towns, cities, islands and neighbourhoods) all over the world were recognised as formal transition initiatives.[3] While many are situated in the UK, there are also initiatives in the US, Australia, New

[1] Pleas for localisation are not new. Historically, the advocacy of localisation goes back at least to the utopias developed by nineteenth century thinkers such as William Morris and Edward Bellamy (North 2010a). The more recent "small is beautiful" proponents of the 1970s (Schumacher, 1973) also still influence current localisation debates (Feagan, 2007).

[2] While there is a tendency no longer to speak about Transition *Towns*, but about Transition *culture* or Transition *network*, we have chosen to stick to the original term 'Transition Towns' in this article, in particular because this is how the movement calls itself in Flanders.

[3] http://www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives/by-number, date: 16 July 2013.

Zealand, Canada, Chile, Finland, Germany, Italy and Japan. In addition, there are a large number of informal or not yet formal groups, of which several are located in Flanders (Belgium).

By July 2013, there were 80 Flemish (mostly informal) transition initiatives. Many of them are located in towns or small cities in predominantly rural areas (examples include Scherpenheuvel, Ramsel and Zedelgem, towns or small cities with a population of less than 7000 inhabitants situated nearby or in the countryside), but there are also some urban groups (such as in Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels, with populations of up to 500.000 inhabitants), and groups that are located in suburbs of larger cities.

Despite its strong presence in urban and suburban locations, Transition Towns to a large extent promotes rural values and practices. The movement could therefore be seen as part of a larger trend to revalue rural concerns in contemporary society (Woods, 2009; see also Neal, 2013). Characteristic of this is, amongst others, the focus of the movement on local food provision. Ian Bailey, Rob Hopkins and Geoff Wilson (2010: 600-601) stipulate that "*each initiative is encouraged to identify issues most relevant to that community*", while they highlight that "*[a] starting point for most initiatives is food as an exemplar of how basic needs can be liberated from oil dependency*". Maybe even more than in the UK or in other countries, food is the primary focus of most transition initiatives in Flanders, which especially presents a challenge for urban transition groups, obliging them to transgress the rural-urban dichotomy in relation to food provision (Woods, 2009). Through activities such as city and roof gardening, setting up local food networks, farmer markets or self-harvesting farms (in the nearby countryside), establishing organic and seasonal eating houses, or promoting compost toilets, herbal walks, urban bee keeping, permaculture community allotments and repair and recycle workshops, these groups try to bring the rural into the city, or, in other words, to 'ruralise' the city. As Sarah Neal (2013: 61) argues, such initiatives "*are indicative of the recognition of social-nature proximities and the relationship of humans to the non-human*" thereby challenging not only "*the old modernist separation of the social and the natural*" but also "*urban and rural binaries*". As a result "*new hybrid sociospatial forms"* are established *"that blur the rural and the urban*" (Woods, 2009: 853).

Furthermore, as we will show, the 'ruralisation' of the city as promoted by Transition Towns also has a strong socio-cultural dimension: for instance, by promoting a specific type of social relations and a particular vision of 'the good life', the movement aims to revitalise "*the social and cultural meanings attached to rural places*" (Cloke, 2006: 21). In other words, Transition Towns could not only be seen as a ruralisation movement in the materialist meaning of the word, but also in relation to how rurality is socio-culturally constructed (Cloke, 2006; Woods, 2009).

The Transition Towns movement has known relatively quick growth in Flanders, setting up a large number of meetings, activities and actions, often involving a remarkably high number of participants. That so many Flemish groups nevertheless remain informal, follows from a certain heterodoxy: on the one hand, they are clearly inspired by the ideas of the movement, while on the other hand, they take the freedom to give their own interpretation and direction to the movement's ideas, emphasising in particular the 11th step of Transition Towns' 12-step approach: "*Let it go where it wants to go…*" (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008: 27). Their primary goal is to develop local resilience within the concrete setting of their community, not to become 'branded' as part of the Transition Network. They want to "*do things*", to use the words of Amanda Smith (2011: 102).

1.2. Post-politics

New movements such as Transition Towns cannot be understood in isolation from the broader socio-historical context (Defilippis, Fisher and Shragge 2006). Interestingly, Transition Towns explicitly portrays itself as breaking with conventional environmental discourses, and as innovating on several fronts (Hopkins, 2008a). First, the movement criticises the dominant focus on *"individual"* behaviour change, and advocates "*collective"* behaviour change instead (Hopkins, 2008a: 135). Moreover, in contrast to conventional approaches, *The Transition Handbook* argues that "*the man in the street*" is not the problem, but the solution, and that a movement should not prescribe people's actions, but primarily play a catalysing role. Transition Towns also dismisses the widely held belief

that economic growth is still possible ("*albeit a greener growth*") advocating an "*economic renaissance*" instead ("*albeit a local one*"). Finally, it explicitly presents its focus on relocalisation as an alternative to worn-out discourses about sustainable development.

Transitions Towns is of course not the only or the first movement to criticise conventional environmental discourses. All over the world, people and groups from different backgrounds are pursuing alternatives to the predominant paradigms of ecological modernisation, sustainable development, and the currently fashionable notions of green growth and the green economy as they are considered insufficiently effective or just (e.g. Bond, 2012; Angus 2009). From a specifically academic perspective, the latter have also been criticised as partaking in a profound tendency towards depoliticisation characterising the current era (e.g., Bettini, 2013; Goeminne, 2010; Kenis and Lievens, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2007; 2010; 2013; Žižek, 2008). By focusing on technical (e.g., nuclear energy, carbon capture and storage), market-oriented (e.g., emission trading), and individualised (e.g., sustainable consumption) measures, hegemonic approaches, tend to refrain from fundamental debates on the kind of societal transformations needed to tackle climate change (Kenis and Lievens, 2014 b). However, the question is not only how effective or just these conventional approaches are. The problem is also that they are often represented as the only feasible and realistic ones, as a result of which it becomes very difficult for alternative movements to make their voices heard (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014). As conflict is frequently rejected as irresponsible given the common challenges we face and the urgency of the crisis, a strong consensual logic unfolds. Through the occlusion of the plurality of possible strategies and projects, depoliticised representations of climate change are not only a potential obstacle to tackling it effectively, but also hamper the democratic debate that is needed (Kenis and Lievens, 2014).

In order to understand exactly what is at stake, it is important to consider a distinction made by post-foundational political theorists (Lefort, 1988; Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2005a; Rancière, 1999; Žižek, 1999), namely, the distinction between 'politics' and 'the political'. Different scholars have

given slightly different accounts of these notions, but they all share the same general intuition.[4] Chantal Mouffe (2005a: 9) has provided a typical definition when she states that "*politics*" is about "*the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created*", while "*the political*" refers to "*the dimension of antagonism*". Politics, more generally, refers to the specific social sphere made up of institutions such as parliament and government. The political, in contrast, is broader and more specific at the same time: it refers to an order of representations (or discourses) through which society is given meaning, and these discourses can evidently manifest themselves outside the sphere of politics itself. More precisely, the political is that order of discourses that acknowledges the existence of power, conflict, division and contingency in society. It is the concealment of these latter elements, for example in discourses advocating consensus, which is constitutive of the post-political (Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2005a).[5]

More precisely, one could state that a discourse is post-political when it misrecognises the constructed and therefore contingent nature of the social; conceals the fact that each construction entails certain exclusions (an element which is stressed by both Mouffe and Rancière) and can therefore generate conflicts or antagonisms; and obscures the fact that the construction of the social inevitably entails acts of power. As Slavoj Žižek (1999) has stressed, the effect of such post-political representations of society is especially that they occlude the possibility of more far-reaching social transformations. Moreover, democracy itself is at stake in post-politics: democracy, according to these scholars, is impossible when conflict, power or exclusion remain invisible and uncontestable.

[4] Jacques Rancière (1999), for example, speaks about the difference between politics and the police, but the logic behind this distinction is similar to other post-foundational approaches. For a more profound analysis of the different currents in post-foundational political theory and their relation to environmental discourses, see Kenis and Lievens (2014). For a further elaboration of Rancière's work in relation to climate change discourses, see Kenis and Mathijs (2014).

[5] The term 'depoliticisation' is also used in a broader, and often theoretically less rigorous meaning. However, we use depoliticisation and post-politics more or less as synonyms, both referring to the loss of the political as analysed by, amongst others, Mouffe (2002), and applied on environmental issues by, amongst others, Swyngedouw (2010).

According to Erik Swyngedouw (2007; 2010; 2013), post-politics manifests itself in particular within many of the currently predominant environmental discourses. A hypothesis informing our research is that it is partly against this backdrop that recent, alternative forms of environmentalism, such as Transition Towns, arose. The task these movements face is not easy: they attempt to develop radical alternatives, but to make these visible, they also have to break through consensual and technocratic logics at work in the environmental sphere. The pivotal question is therefore whether and to what extent such alternative environmental movements succeed in going beyond post-politics. Specifically, the question at hand is how recent localisation discourses, as put forward for example by Transition Towns, relate to the problem of post-politics.

For Peter North (2010a), Transition Towns' focus on localisation is a sufficient reason to qualify the movement as transcending the post-political condition. He writes, "*[the Transition Towns movement] is a fundamentally more radical, utopian vision of a society which has transitioned to a post-carbon economy based on inclusion, local distinctiveness, equality and freedom. As such, it is deeply political*" (North, 2010a: 591). Similarly, John Urry (2011: 92) diagnoses Transition Towns as being "*significantly political since it challenges the sedimented systems of twentieth-century carbon capitalism*". Like North, Urry (2011: 93) also rejects the post-political thesis as such for not taking the "*range of different politics surrounding changing climates*" into account.

However, as we will argue in this article, the problem of (post-)politics is more complex than North and Urry seem to acknowledge. To uncover what is exactly at stake, we will develop both a theoretical exploration and an in-depth empirical analysis of Transition Towns' discourse on localisation (with a specific focus on local food provision) in an attempt to answer the question to what extent the movement indeed contributes to overcoming post-politics.

1.3. Research objectives

In our research, we aim to assess how Transition Towns, and particularly its Flemish wing, deal with post-politics. We do this in particular from the perspective of how the movement maps or represents the local, and to what extent it gives a (post-)political account of localisation processes. The answer to these questions is evidently of great relevance for the movement's capacity to provide effective and democratic solutions to peak oil and climate change.

In order to address these issues, we will proceed, in the following section, to discuss recent debates on localisation processes, with a view to identifying how such processes stand up to the critique of post-politics. In the third section, we present the research framework and methodology. The fourth section is a combined results and discussion section, in which we elaborate on why Transition Towns prefers the local scale, how they conceive of the locality's relation to the broader context of society, and how they understand its internal structure. This leads us to the final section, which pulls from the preceding data and analyses to investigate to what extent Transition Town's concept of localisation contributes to the politicisation or depoliticisation of peak oil and climate change, and what is its effect.

2. Theory

2.1. Idealising the local

Localisation is increasingly promoted both by scholars and activists as a strategy for sustainability. In what follows, we will discuss some of the main arguments in favour of localisation. The focus will be on local food provision, which is what the Transition Towns movement in Flanders is especially focusing on. However, many of the arguments provided are also applicable to other issues.

First, localisation is said to have environmental advantages since it cuts energy and pollution costs related to global transportation and distribution systems (e.g., reducing food miles) (North, 2010a; Seyfang, 2006; 2007). Furthermore, local food systems are supposed to rely more often on

sustainable production methods, such as organic farming (Born and Purcell, 2006). Second, from a social-economic perspective, more face-to-face interactions amongst local people would help foster relations of trust between producers and consumers and, more generally, amongst citizens (Sage, 2003). Increased human interaction and trust, it is argued, strengthens local economies and communities (Seyfang, 2006; 2007): local empowerment, (food) security, and even social justice and democracy are expected to be the result (Feenstra, 1997). Third, it is claimed that local food is riper, fresher, and more nutritious – partly because its 'local nature' implies the elimination or reduction of extended shelf life, packaging, transport and synthetic re-fortification – and thus healthier and of a higher quality (DeLind, 2006). Furthermore, proximity would enlarge the possibilities for the consumer to see under what conditions food is grown (e.g., what pesticides or fertilisers are used) and to form an opinion on the health aspects of food production.

In many pleas for localisation, the local receives an inherently positive connotation (Born and Purcell, 2006; Sonnino, 2010). Furthermore, in some instances, the local is depicted as an intrinsic site of opposition and resistance to what are called the 'destructive forces of globalisation' (e.g., Allen et al., 2003; Cavangh and Mander, 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Feagan, 2007; Sage, 2003). The local is then presented as radical and subversive while the global is conceived as hegemonic and oppressive (Born and Purcell, 2006).

2.2. The local trap

Unsurprisingly, a number of authors takes issue with this idealisation of the local (e.g., Allen et al., 2003; Campbell, 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2000; 2003; Winter, 2003). Branden Born and Mark Purcell (2006) speak about the 'local trap', referring to the tendency amongst activists and researchers to assume that the local is a priori desirable over larger scales, whereas there are sound reasons to argue, as well as many empirical studies suggesting, that this is not by definition the case.

First, on the environmental terrain, a number of studies show that while localisation may reduce both transportation and distribution costs, other environmental costs, such as heating or irrigation, can increase (Sonnino, 2010). Furthermore, the claim that shorter distances are always more ecological overlooks factors such as the transported volume and the travel distance of the consumer (Mariola, 2008; Van Hauwermeiren et al., 2007). Remarkably, the local is sometimes also equated with being organic, avoiding GMOs, preserving open space, tasting better, and so on (Born and Purcell, 2006). However, as Hinrichs (2003: 35) aptly argues: "*Small-scale, local farmers are not inherently better environmental stewards*".

Secondly, critical questions can be raised with regard to food quality and human health. It might seem logical that a farmer closer to the market has fresher, and thus more nutritious and healthier food to offer than one who has to travel a greater distance. But in practice, this is not always the case. As Born and Purcell (2006: 203) state: "*Large-scale farming operations can, and must use, rapid-shipment methods and quick refrigeration to keep produce fresh. In some cases, it might be fresher and better for consumption than the local choice*". Moreover, other features, such as production methods (e.g., whether or not they are organic) could have a greater impact on quality and health aspects than travel distance.

Thirdly, as to the putative socio-economic benefits of localisation, several authors argue that localising the economy can produce economic losses for the local community just as easily as it can engender economic advantages (Born and Purcell, 2006). Moreover, even if localisation strengthens the local 'economy', it is not certain that it also strengthens the local 'community'. Existing local inequalities can result in an unjust distribution of the economic gains of localisation, thus reinforcing rather than alleviating social injustice in the locality (Hinrichs and Allen, 2008). Similarly, even if localisation does have positive benefits for a local community, this does not mean that it also enhances social justice on a broader level. Not all local communities have the same resources or capacities (DeFilippis, 2004). Critical authors therefore stress that proximity is not the same as social fairness (Allen, 2008). They argue that there is no reason to expect that local production and

consumption in itself leads to more just social relations, even if producers and consumers know each other personally (Hinrichs, 2000). Local systems can lead to greater face-to-face interaction, and as such to more trust, but there is no reason to expect that this will intrinsically lead to more social justice, transparency, sustainability, democracy or (food) security (e.g., Allen, 2008; Hinrichs, 2003; Hinrichs and Allen, 2008). While the local can be empowering for certain local actors, it can in the same way be disempowering for other, both local and non-local actors. As Patricia Allen (2008) points out: "*Without a direct focus on justice issues, alternative agrifood efforts may only create marginal, safe spaces for the privileged*". Similarly, Clare Hinrichs (2000: 301) emphasises that "*many direct agricultural markets involve social relations where the balance of power and privilege ultimately rests with well-to-do consumers".*

Furthermore, several authors show that localisation bears the risk of going hand in hand with forms of protectionism, particularism, patriotism, elitism, conservatism and even xenophobia (see e.g., Allen, 2004; Allen et al., 2003; Campbell, 2004; Feagan, 2007; Hinrichs, 2003). This tendency is often called defensive localism (e.g., Allen, 1999; Hinrichs, 2003; Winter, 2003). It can lead to the misrecognition of wider social interests and internal difference, and to the cultivation of feelings of antipathy towards the 'other' (Allen, 2004; Hinrichs, 2003; Winter, 2003). Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman (2005: 362) refer to an "*unreflexive localism*" which can lead to "*a potentially undemocratic, unrepresentative, and defensive militant particularism*".

The conclusion on the basis of these observations should be nuanced. Localisation can have desirable effects, but these require a number of important conditions to be fulfilled. Much depends on how the local is constructed: in this sense, 'defensive' and more 'progressive' forms of localism can be distinguished (e.g., DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Featherstone et al., 2012; Hinrichs, 2003). Some authors, however, go as far as to claim that, whether in its defensive or progressive variant, "*there is nothing inherent about scale*" (Born and Purcell, 2006: 196). In other words, one cannot equate a scalar strategy with a particular set of outcomes: this would amount to a conflation of means with ends, strategies with goals. The outcomes of localisation efforts would not be intrinsic,

but contextual: they depend on which actors and agendas are empowered by a specific scalar strategy.

Three theoretical reasons are put forward to explain why there is nothing inherent about scale (Born and Purcell, 2006; see also Brown and Purcell, 2005; Purcell and Brown, 2005). First, it is stated that scale is socially constructed, and is thus a product of conflict and power. Therefore, its qualities are not ontological but contingent. Second, it is argued that scale is both fluid and fixed. On the one hand, scales are not permanent, invariable structures given by nature; they are mutable. They are constantly being made and remade. On the other hand, their fluidity is not boundless. Once constructed, they can last for a certain time and become hegemonic. As a result, they are real and have concrete effects, for example, in the way they favour certain groups over others. Third, it is stated that scale is a relational concept: the notion of a local scale makes sense only in relation to other scales. Each scale is "*defined by and tied to the others*" (Born and Purcell, 2006: 198). Like scales themselves, the relationships between particular scales are claimed to be socially constructed. Born and Purcell (2006) conclude that, at most, scale can be a strategy to achieve a particular end, and this end, they argue, should be clearly articulated in itself and distinguished from the scalar strategy that is used as a means to achieve it.

2.3. Localism and the (post-)political

Interestingly, some of the objections to localisation strategies are strikingly parallel to criticisms of post-politics. Indeed, discourses that idealise the local tend to misrecognise the fact that scale is a social construction and is therefore contingent; that competing interests and ideologies are at stake; and that forms of power, exclusion and conflict are involved in scalar strategies. Our thesis, therefore, is that what idealisations of the local tend to overlook is exactly what is also concealed in post-political representations of society: its contingency, and the divisions and power relations which it is characterised by. Remarkably, even in the critical literature on localisation, the problems of the

'local trap' have not yet systematically been analysed in terms of post-politics. As we will see, however, our research led us to the conclusion that the local trap can best be conceptualised as a 'post-political trap'.

Interestingly, some authors have pointed to the apolitical or depoliticising effect of particular localisation discourses (e.g., Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2003) and even of Transition Towns itself (e.g., Mason and Whitehead, 2012; Neal, 2013; Smith, 2011; Trapese Collective, 2008). However, there is no systematic exploration of the link between Transition Towns' representation of the local and post-politics so far. It ought to be stressed, in this context, that localisation as such cannot be called post-political, but only the way it is represented or constructed through certain discourses. Indeed, investigating post-politics, a crucial question is whether power and conflict are rendered visible or not (Mouffe, 2000; 2005b), and this visibilisation happens through discourse. A local food system is not political or post-political in itself: this depends on how it is discursively given meaning.

The fact that Transition Towns goes 'against' the stream, and develops quite a radical alternative to conventional environmental discourses, is thus no sufficient ground for calling the movement 'political' (North, 2010a; Urry, 2011). Nor is it a sufficient argument for dismissing the 'post-political' thesis, as North and Urry do when they refer to the movement as exemplifying the 'really existing multiplicity of approaches' in relation to climate change.[6] As Chantal Mouffe (2005a) would answer: calling certain discourses post-political does not mean there are no forms of opposition or antagonism anymore. For her, power, conflict and exclusion are constitutive of the social. The crucial question is whether the discourses through which the social is interpreted account for these realities and make them visible.

[6] Other critics of the post-political thesis make a similar argument as North (2010a) and Urry (2011), referring to more oppositional grassroots movements, such as the Climate Justice Action Movement (e.g., Chatterton al., 2013; Featherstone, 2013). For an analysis of this movement from the perspective of 'the political', see Kenis and Mathijs (2014).

The question of post-politics is especially important from a democratic point of view. As several political theorists argue, depoliticisation is the central element threatening to undermine democracy (e.g. Lefort, 1988; Mouffe, 2005a; Marchart, 2007; Rancière, 1999). Only when conflict is recognised and made visible, it becomes possible to keep it within democratic bounds (Mouffe 2005a). If not, however, the political (and its conflictual nature) does not disappear as such, but it comes back with a vengeance: it becomes intensified and reappears under forms that are less democratic, or less liable to be moderated and institutionalised. Mouffe famously argues for example that the rise of the far right during the last decades is the result of the consensual logic governing the contemporary political scene after the weakening and demise of the left/right distinction. Similarly, consensual logics lead to what Rancière (1999) calls 'post-democracy', a constellation in which what is actually visible is presented as the only possible or imaginable reality. For these authors, the very possibility to question and contest the actual state of society is a crucial feature of democracy.

Adopting a political discourse perspective can shed an interesting and innovative light on the ongoing localisation debate, as it provides a unifying framework on the basis of which we can assess how power, conflict and contingencies are represented or concealed in certain scalar discourses. Furthermore, it also allows us to investigate to what extent movements depart from hegemonic practices and create a democratic space in which political plurality can become visible. The assessment of localisation discourses from the vantage point of the (post-)political, evidently requires empirical inquiry.

3. Research Design

To study Transition Towns and how it represents the local, we conducted an extensive empirical study relying on qualitative research methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Esterberg, 2002; Patton, 2002) investigating how Transition Towns was launched in Flanders (Belgium) and how it developed

during its first years. From September 2008 to March 2010 we studied the movement intensively and from the inside as activist researchers (Hale, 2008); then, for the subsequent two years, from 2011 through 2012, we followed it from a short distance.[7]

As activist researchers, we were especially involved in the transition initiative of Ghent, which was the most active group at the start of the movement in Flanders. Ghent is a city of 250.000 inhabitants and has a population density of almost 1600 inhabitants per square kilometre. Although it is the second biggest city in Flanders, large parts of it retain the character of a town. Ghent is actually composed of a series of 'village-like' neighbourhoods with their proper outlook and character. Interestingly, like other transition groups located in cities (Smith, 2011; see also Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson, 2010), the group in Ghent decided soon after its launch to split up in neighbourhood groups, thus starting to work on smaller 'village-like' scales, while at the same time maintaining a hub at the city level.

Next to our involvement in the transition group of Ghent, we also participated in activities of several other groups (including some outspokenly rural groups) and closely followed activities on the Flemish hub level. In total, we engaged as activist researchers in more than 40 meetings, activities and actions of the Transition Towns movement.

To get a more profound understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the people involved in the movement, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews of about two hours on average. Half of the interviewees were members of the transition initiative of Ghent (and its subgroups), the other half were key persons from other transition groups, mainly from towns or small cities situated in predominantly rural areas (examples include Ramsel, Merchtem, Scherpenheuvel, Kruishoutem and Hoeilaart). A document analysis of books, leaflets and websites produced by the movement completed our study.

[7] Only the first author of this article was involved as an activist researcher in Transition Towns. Yet, for convenience's sake, we will continue to use the plural form 'we'.

Being involved as activist researchers basically meant that we were active participants in the movement amongst other transitioners (setting up meetings and activities, engaging in strategic debates and actions, getting involved in awareness raising, and doing practical tasks, including, for example, contributing to the Dutch translation of *The Transition Handbook*), while, at the same time, maintaining our position as researchers. At the start of our research, we asked permission to be closely involved in the movement in this role, and to conduct interviews.[8]

The combination of our involvement as activist researchers with the conduct of interviews and the study of documents was aimed at enhancing the validity of the performed study. At the same time, it allowed us to study potential divergences between Transition Towns' 'official' discourse and how it was taken up in some of the local initiatives in Flanders. In order to fine-tune this comparison, we presented interviewees with theses collected from our document analysis (in particular *The Transition Handbook* and the *Transition Initiatives Primer*) and asked them whether they agreed with these theses or not, and why.[9] Moreover, we asked how, according to them, the theses should be interpreted. This allowed us not only to acquire a rich and thick image of the movement, but also to check for possible misinterpretations from our side and to obtain a detailed account of the nuances present inside the movement.

In the presentation of the results, we will especially make use of the data obtained on the basis of the interviews, which were digitally recorded, fully transcribed and coded, and analysed in detail with the help of the software programme NVIVO®. The data obtained through participant observation and document analysis serve as a general background for the analysis.

[8] In another paper, we provide an elaborate account of the methodological and political difficulties of being an activist researcher, in particular within a movement with which one starts to disagree.

[9] We particularly used these documents because they were the first transition documents that were translated in Dutch, and they had a huge impact on the movement in Flanders. Even if the movement in the meantime became broader and some concepts changed, these first publications therefore still constitute its ideological backbone.

4. Results and discussion

In what follows, we will present our research results. We will focus on the following questions: why does Transition Towns prefer the local scale, how does it conceive of its relation to the broader context, and how does it understand its internal structure? As will become clear, the movement has a strong tendency to idealise the local, and is liable to fall into the local trap, which we will show to be primarily a post-political trap. At the same time, however, several transitioners appear to have an outspoken political consciousness and adopt widely diverging viewpoints. The result is that Transition Towns is not free from division, and thus of potential politicisation, even though these diverging viewpoints (until now) only occasionally openly and visibly clashed.

4.1. The locality as the preferred scale to tackle peak oil and climate change

What are Transition Town's main arguments for localisation? To start with, the locality is promoted as the preferred scale to tackle peak oil and climate change. Localisation would shorten distribution networks, thus reducing oil consumption and CO_2 emissions. Anna, one of our interviewees, argues for example: "*what you very clearly have is a reduction of energy use, of food kilometres and the like*".[10] Transitioners also argue that proximity results in greater care because "*you see the consequences of what you do*". This would be valid for both consumers and producers. Daisy notices for example: "*if the company is closer to the people, they will apply more effort to do it well. Because there is a social bond between people*". Daisy's statement also indicates the notion that localisation is supposed to lead to more social connectedness. Several transitioners argue that connectedness is not only essential for efficiently tackling climate change, it is also central for "*the good life*" they want to build after the collapse of current society they foresee and the necessary (and, in their view, desirable) transition to "*another world*" (see also Barry and Quilley, 2009). As the

[10] All first names refer to interviewees. They have been modified for reasons of anonymity.

Transition Initiatives Primer relays to its readers: *"these relocalisation efforts are designed to result in a life that is more fulfilling, more socially connected and more equitable*" (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008: 4). Many transitioners endorse this point of view, frequently linking it to imaginations of a (sometimes idealised) past of resilient and cohesive rural life. As Peter states: "*It's not that I think that rural life was better on all accounts 100 years ago, but what we should strive for goes into that direction, I think, rather than continuing the current course*." Similarly, Anna tells us what she "*hear[s] in this story*": *"The local dimension, those mutual relations, the resilience of such a village, that is a form of embeddedness that is very comforting […] that is really the good life."* Often, such an interpretation goes together with romantic visions of rural local community life. Marc for example muses: *"Yeah, I see myself already, coming back from the field with hay, together with a group of people, and then we make a big heap of hay, and everybody stays overnight, well… I am quite romantic on this, yes (laughs)."*

Seen from the perspective of the literature reviewed above, we can observe that many arguments for localisation provided by transitioners (re)produce a rather typical, idealised story about the local, constructing at the same time "*idyllised meanings of rurality*" (Cloke, 2006: 21). Consequently, a sometimes over-romanticised 'local-good/global-bad' distinction tends to sneak into their discourse (Hinrichs, 2003). Scale is (implicitly) supposed to be the main distinguishing factor, not only between environmental damage and sustainability, but also between the 'good' and the 'bad' life. Some transitioners state this very explicitly. For example, reflecting on the root causes of the crises we witness today, Kate states: "*I think it is related to scale, more than to the concept of the company, for example. It's about how big something is*." A wide array of statements similar to this are made by other transitioners. Especially in relation to the responsibility of business actors in causing climate change, blame was given primarily to 'big' companies: they are problematic, not small ones. What is evidently neglected in such statements is the fact that all operate according to the same market mechanisms (Albo, 2007; North, 2010a; Wall, 2005). Only one interviewee, Daisy, expresses doubt on this point, implicitly recognising that there is no necessary relation between scale

and sustainability. She states*: "Yes, in the past, I really believed that if people are responsible for a certain area, eh, local and self-sufficient, well then they will consume and pollute much less. But by coincidence somebody told me yesterday about Easter Island, and how they destroyed their own natural environment ... and that did, yeah, that undermines it actually, doesn't it? And now, I don't really know how to think about this anymore…"*

Significantly, the local in Transition Towns discourse is not merely a question of scale, but acquires, as we will see, a substantively normative content. This is a bit at odds with the idea advocated by the movement that resilient local communities should be built through open processes. Following Hopkins' (2008a: 135) statement that the movement has to act as a catalyst for communities "*to explore and come up with its own answers*", Jessica, for instance, emphasises that for her transition means "*simply, that people who live in a certain neighborhood determine by themselves what they want to do and how they want to do it"*. Inevitably, a tension seems to arise between letting people build their own Transition Town through an open process and the substantive normative content that its localisation discourse seems to embrace from the start, and many transitioners seemed to oscillate between both positions. This tension between viewing movement-building as following a recipe of clear-cut normative principles on the one hand, and considering it as an open and contingent process on the other, is of course extremely relevant from the point of view of the political.

A typical transition process starts with common visioning exercises in which members of a local community try to imagine a resilient future locality. At the same time, however, these exercises are often framed within the limits of a particular notion of 'the good life'. The effect is that a seemingly collective and participatory process risks to be implicitly steered by the preconceived visions of the movement's founders and pioneers, an (often) small group of mainly well-educated middle-class people (O'Rourke, 2008 in Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson, 2010), who, in the words of Dupuis and

Goodman (2005: 361) "*decide what is 'best' for everyone*". [11] Unsurprisingly, this also leads to divergences within the movement. While some participants express concerns about the lack of diversity, and look for ways to broaden the movement's social base, others merely notice that "*the others*" do not seem ready yet for the desired transition.

A core feature of 'the good life' promoted by the movement is social connectedness, thus rejecting anonymous, individualised life in cities. In the words of Terry Marsden (2006: 14), they try "*to escape the seeming anomie of urban life by creating 'new localisms'*". Transitioners claim greater social connectedness can only be realised on a smaller scale. However, whereas Marsden thus describes the post-urban desire to go back to the countryside, Transition Towns rather tries to bring the rural into the city. The movement advocates a 'ruralisation' of the city by (re)dividing it into smaller village-scale neighbourhoods or communities in order to recreate the "*lifestyle experiences*" that are "*traditionally associated with rural life, such as community solidarity*" (Woods, 2009: 53). It is particularly on this smaller level that transition initiatives are supposed to find fertile ground. The example of Ghent is revealing: after a successful start at the city level, a number of transitioners argued that the initiative was not 'local' enough, that one cannot create a socially connected 'community' on this level, and that the (contemporary) city is not part of their imagined future alternative. For that reason, the group decided to split up in smaller neighbourhood groups.

Stronger social bonds are not only considered crucial for local inhabitants' well-being, but also for solving a wide range of contemporary problems, such as climate change. In that sense, Transition Towns follows community advocates such as Robert Putnam (2001) who consider the glue of strong social ties as the alpha and omega of nearly every single 'good', thereby risking to fall in the trap of seeing localisation *"as a panacea to virtually all societal ills*" as Gregory Albo (2007: 338) puts it. As

[11] The lack of diversity within both steering bodies and the membership has been debated both in Flanders and elsewhere. For instance, Smith (2011: 102) argues that *"membership diversity, or rather the lack of it"* is a major problem for the movement, since *"preliminary findings from a recent survey run by the project suggest that 95% of the respondents described themselves as white European, and 86% were educated to post-graduate level*".

Marc argues: "*What should happen? Simply, people should become more sociable again, and you can't maybe imagine, but a lot would follow from that …"* In this light, more oppositional or critical attitudes towards community building are easily shoved aside. Marc ardently opposes "*we against them*" discourses, for example, stating that if we want stronger social ties, we should be positive, open and kind to, literally, everyone. Such a rejection of discourses based on struggle or conflict constitutes a fundamental feature of the movement. It is no coincidence that divisive terms such as 'gender', 'class' or 'race', which are central to many politicising discourses, are almost absent from Transition Towns' narrative. Insofar as the notion of social justice appears, its divisive and politicising impact is often neutralised by the assumption that justice results from better social ties. Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson (2010: 598) claim that Transition Towns endeavours "*to bring together a broad range of social concerns under the Transition banner*". However, these social concerns are especially "*about 'affluenza' and the erosion of local communities by globalisation*", again stressing social connectedness and scale as core social issues. Hinrichs (2000: 301) warns that as a result, less privileged people within local communities thus often have to "*weigh concerns with income and price against the supposed benefits of direct, social ties*". Since "*the balance of power ultimately rests with well-to-do consumers*" social connectedness risks becoming a poor substitute for what social justice could actually mean (Hinrichs, 2000: 301).

4.2. The local community first!

Localisation has yet another important role in many transitioners' understanding of how to deal with peak oil and climate change: it also acts as a local haven of refuge against "*the coming storm*". In this sense, the focus is no longer on avoiding this storm, or on developing broader strategies that include people beyond the local community. Anna emphasises for example that the Transition Towns movement is in the first instance *"about the survival of a local community*". Or as Jacob ponders: *"Then I think, yes, if things go wrong, then I can still live."* This survivalist perspective, as noted by

Barry and Quilley (2009) and Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson (2010), is related to an apocalyptic discourse which sometimes overshadows the 'happy community building' atmosphere of the movement, and is mobilised in order to urge people to engage in a far-reaching forms of localisation. Climate change, and especially peak oil underpin the movement's apocalyptic expectations. According to Mason and Whitehead (2012: 496) they form "*the framework of converging catastrophes within which Transition Culture operates*". One of the reasons for stressing peak oil, is that "*whereas poorer regions of the world are predicted to bear the brunt of climate change and biodiversity loss, the severest impacts of peak oil are likely to be felt in the advanced North*" (Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010: 602), leading John Barry and Stephen Quilley (2009: 17) to conclude that Transition Towns' success is potentially due to "*the tacit and sometimes overt emphasis on survival".*

The idea that peak oil and climate change are imminent, and that we ought to prepare ourselves for the coming catastrophe, is, as Swyngedouw would state it (2010), typically undergirding forms of post-politics. The fact that the building of local resilient communities is presented as "*the only viable solution*", contributes to this post-political predicament (Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson, 2010, 598). Confronted with the scale and emergency of the challenge, it seems we can no longer afford any loss of time due to doubts, disagreements or endless debate. Although this is not necessarily the case, such discourses can also easily lead to what has been called defensive localism (Allen, 2004; Hinrichs, 2003; Winter, 2003). One of the latter's consequences is that solidarity risks being restricted to people from nearby, maybe even to people 'we know'. The fates of people from far away, people we do not know, risk to remain out of sight (Allen 1999). This is especially the case if the urge to ensure the survival of one's own community goes together with the idea that survival will not be possible for everyone, and that therefore, perhaps, a kind of "*survival of the fittest*" will be the inevitable result. Concerning the need to prepare for the coming catastrophe, and to make sure one obtains her or his share of limited resources, Ronny tells us: *"So, actually a kind of fear to survive, to make sure you have those basic goods. And my thing was then, well, okay, if we will announce this very publicly, then everyone will buy the last forests, and I don't know what …I just want to make sure I have my own*

forest too". John emphasises, in his turn, that local, resilient, and especially rural communities are better positioned in such a situation: "*I think people on the countryside have the advantage of disposing of some land and wood, and that people in the city will face difficult times. Well, I don't want to think about this too much, but stories by your grandparents come into mind: during the war, peasants were much better off, because they had food*."

These findings correspond with the observation of Barry and Quilley (2009: 27) that the focus of the movement on survival and catastrophe "*is also present […] in the priorities that emerge very early in the development of local TT [Transition Towns] initiatives – concerns about food production, allotments, buying land and the securing food and energy supplies*". As they argue, "*the discourse of peak oil and food shortages feeds very directly into anxieties about family and community survival*". North (2010a: 587) concludes that the key question is whether "*localisation [is] just a form of survivalism that stresses gardening rather than guns?*"

The answer is not always clear. Several transitioners emphasise that building one's own haven of refuge does not imply that the Transition Towns movement would not also (try to) be socially just. Two arguments are put forward to this end. The first is that the movement takes "*all local habitants*" into account. The other argument is that "*in the end, it is also better for others, like the [people from the] South*" if we build local resilient communities here. Seth argues for example: "*Yes, but I think we serve the world best by, eh, folding back upon ourselves rather than by being concordant. […] I think Africa will be much better off when we don't bother them any longer than when we express our solidarity with them or so*."

However, some transitioners problematise this strategy. As William argues, the "*we*" Transition Towns tries to build thus risks to become something negative: "*we are prepared and the rest isn't*". The focus is then on "*my village, my community"* and the conclusion is that *"everybody closes his door, and you will protect yourself*". Moreover, not all are convinced that building resilient local communities in the North is better for the global South. As Kate notices: "*Because I mean for the South, at this moment it [consumption by people from the North] is a very important source of*

revenue for them, it is unjust, but ok, what will you do about it? No, we just close that off, and we will fold back upon our own neighbourhood. Well, that doesn't seem to be a good scenario to me".

Yet others criticise this strategy from a totally different perspective. They doubt whether building resilient local communities will give them the security they desire. As Sophie explains: "*Mhmm. I didn't experience it yet, it is not proven yet, that it will give me more life assurance*". This seems to be particularly worrying insofar as there is a chance that others will try to profit from one's self-sufficient community if, in a moment of crisis, push comes to shove. Jessica elaborates on this, saying: "*The question is, of course, you form a resilient community that can sustain itself very well, and next door there is one which is not able to do so: to what extent won't they come to profit from what you realised?*" She continues: "*So yeah. If there is really a crisis, then I don' t know if you have really put yourself in security in this way."* Further on in the interview, Jessica argues that for this very reason, we should urge other localities to build their own self-reliant local community as well. This idea is echoed in the 'official' discourse. Insofar as the movement has a broader strategy for society at large, it consists of a "*viral" or "rhizomic spread*" of similar local initiatives (Hopkins, 2008a: 202; Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson, 2010: 596). However, this strategy inevitably confronts certain barriers. Not all localities have an equal capacity to transform themselves, nor are the resources to do so evenly distributed (DeFilippis, 2004). As a result, this strategy risks strengthening existing inequalities, reinforcing unequal spatial distributions of financial, environmental and social capacities. Several transitioners are acutely conscious of this risk, and the recent tendency to speak about 'Transition culture' or 'Transition network' instead of 'Transition Towns' perhaps provides a way to deal with it (Mason and Whitehead, 2012; Neal, 2013). Yet, the original focus on (one's own) place is still central to the movement's discourse, with a significant group of transitioners embracing more 'defensive' forms of localism.

Another element which reinforces this defensive localism is that for some transitioners, the locality is not only a kind of haven of refuge, but also something one ought to be attached to, be proud of, even 'love'. The local good – global bad distinction described above threatens to be

reinforced as a distinction between the 'reliability', 'admirablity' and 'quality' of local products and producers versus the 'unreliability', 'unattractiveness' and 'uncertain quality' of global ones. The locality in this way becomes a kind of 'love story'. *The Transition Handbook* gives the example of Louis King, manager of the Riverford farm shop in Totnes, who refers to the fact that *"we like our own products*" as a crucial argument in favour of having a local currency (quoted in Hopkins, 2008a: 189). Through these kinds of statements, localisation threatens to become imbued with a quasi-chauvinist preference for the own locality.

As Hopkins emphasises, key elements of the movement are not only "*local food*" and "*local crafts*", but also "*local history and culture*" (Hopkins, 2008a: 147). Typically, the transition groups in Ghent set up activities intended to revitalise the identity of their neighbourhoods. Such activities included, for instance, theatre plays that aimed at reviving the old village-like neighbourhood, which was portrayed as a form of 'rural city life'. The plays re-envisioned, amongst others, past (often typically rural) crafts, gardening practices, sheep herding and a strong sense of connectedness.

This focus on local history and culture is evidently full of ambiguities, leading to divergences within the movement itself. While some transitioners seem to embrace the local as better in itself, and try to rebuilt local identities, habits or crafts, others are much more sceptical about this. Stressing that this is not her cup of tea, Sophie states for example: "*the local history, the local culture… what I think of that? Something in the sense of patriotism and that kind … well, a bit unhealthy, eh… "*. Similarly, Jessica states: "*It makes me think of the rightwing, well, of your own people first, and your own culture first and… While I find diversity so beautiful. That's why it is rather negative than positive like that for me.*"

These transitioners notice how appealing to the preference for one's own local tradition can potentially be pushed into a conservative, particularistic or even xenophobic direction. This is a risk which several scholars of local food networks also observed (Feagan, 2007; Hinrichs, 2003; Winter, 2003). As many of them show, favouring one's own local culture, especially when this goes together

with the idealisation of a kind of original, homogeneous local tradition, can easily lead to a lack of openness towards outsiders or other cultures who threaten to destroy this 'originality'.

Other motives referred to by transitioners to promote local currency systems risk to reinforce this tendency. In an interview in *The Transition Handbook*, Marjana Kos argues for example about local currency systems: *"It's keeping wealth here"* and *"[It] prevents money from 'leaking out'"* (quoted in Hopkins, 2008a: 188-192). This type of argumentation is characteristic of what scholars such as Clare Hinrichs (2003) and Michael Winter (2003) refer to as defensive localism. As Hinrichs (2003: 37) argues: "*Defensive localisation seeks to reduce the undue flow of resources away from the spatial local and also to protect local members from the depredations and demands of 'outsiders'*". Unsurprisingly, one of the crucial features of defensive localism is its orientation towards "*economic objectives, such as keeping dollars in the community and supporting local businesses*" (Hinrichs and Allen, 2008).

Again, we have to underline that while some transitioners tend to embrace these forms of defensive localism, others explicitly go against it. William observes, for example: *"I think that this corresponds more with the defensive aspect. Transition that starts from a negative scenario: that you start to protect and defend yourself, so to speak, but in a... I don't know exactly how to describe it, but in a darker way. Perhaps a negative protectionism is then also part of it."* William emphasises that this is not the kind of transition he had signed up for, and several transitioners follow him on this point.

However, the 'official' discourse does not provide many answers. While the problem is recognised in the *Transition Initiatives Primer*[12], the solutions provided are limited. At most there is a reference to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, as Anna, one of our interviewees, correctly notices: *"Yes, there are risks of one's own people first, eh, of one's own community first. But the basic manual very clearly speaks about this, they say, 'adopt in your statutes or in your basic documents*

[12] "*We're aware that we need to strengthen this point in response to concerns about extreme political groups becoming involved in transition initiatives*" (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008: 14).

the idea that this is an inclusive thing, and that discrimination against certain parts of the population cannot be tolerated'. But yeah…"

4.3. The locality as internally harmonious

A final observation concerns Transition Towns' understanding of social relations within the locality. In order to realise a transition, it is argued, we have to accomplish "*a degree of dialogue and inclusion that has rarely been achieved before*" (Hopkins, 2008a: 141). The apocalyptic discourse evoked above is used as a rationale to engage in far-reaching forms of collaboration, as it is suggested we can no longer afford to engage in time-consuming conflicts. Because of the "*urgency*" and "*scale of the challenge*", we should all work together (Hopkins, 2008a: 141). "[W]*ithout that we have no chance of success*". As a result, the conflict tends to be understood as one of "*society versus* CO_2" (Swyngedouw, 2007: 27), or applied to Transition Towns: 'locality versus CO_2'. In this way, the enemy, and as such every conflict, is externalised. Conflicts within 'the people' are moved aside.

Interestingly, exactly this focus on all-round collaboration and inclusion seems to attract people from a progressive background to the movement. They interpret this focus in terms of the need to involve those people who are currently structurally excluded from society, such as immigrants. Scholars such as Mason and Whitehead (2012) understand the notion of inclusion in Transition Towns in a similar way. However, the question is whether this interpretation is valid, especially if we look at it from a political point of view. Remarkably, Transition Towns claims not only to try to reach out to excluded people, but especially also to people who are usually not seen as evident allies in the struggle for emancipatory change, such as local business leaders or big landlords. Inclusiveness, in Transition Town's discourse, primarily seems to mean being non-oppositional, strongly collaborative, and pursuing harmony through complementarity amongst individuals and their interests. In this way, the movement evokes the utopia of a harmonious local community, created by all for all (Fisher and Shragge, 2000), in which every distinction between 'we' and 'them' has disappeared. As authors such

as Mouffe (2005) and Swyngedouw (2010) show, such a discourse can have very depoliticising consequences.

That this is not evident for all transitioners becomes clear in a comment from Kate*: "Well, … I find this a very difficult one. For example, yesterday, there was Thomas Leysen of the VBO [Belgian employers organisation] in the newspaper with an opinion article in which he called for the foundation of a green bank. Well, what do you then have to say: 'yes, but it is VBO who says it, and that is not good', or do you have to say 'oh, great, we will realise something together'".* Further in the interview, Kate states that for her, collaborating with business actors is not evident, since she doubts about their intentions. A more conflictual approach to put them under pressure, might be preferable, she suggests. Yet, Transition Towns firmly 'rejects' every 'we against them' discourse. In 2008, the Trapese Collective (2008: 3) published a booklet *The Rocky Road to a Real Transition*, launching a debate on the type of transition the movement aims for: "*to where, and from what?*" The authors refer to a transition group that was reluctant to support another local group in Rossport (Ireland) struggling 'against' Shell building a high-pressure gas pipeline through their community. They describe their stupefaction hearing transitioners arguing 'against' organising support since Transition Towns is "*about positive responses and not something that takes positions 'against' institutions or projects*" (Trapese Collective, 2008: 4-5). Answering this booklet, Rob Hopkins states that "*[o]ne fundamental misunderstanding in this document is the belief that change is something that we have to fight for, that those in positions of power will cling to business as usual for as long as possible, that globalisation will only wobble if we shake it hard enough*." As he argues, "*a successful transition through peak oil and climate change will by necessity be about a bringing together of individuals and organisations, rather than a continued fracturing and antagonising*" (Hopkins, 2008b), and many transitioners agree with him. Sophie emphasises for example: *"There are many people who organise actions 'against'. And I don't support that. That is something which I experience differently in the transition initiative, and what attracts me to a big extent."* Hopkins (2008a) stresses that it is important to collaborate with other people of the local community, including local authorities and

businesses. Remarkably, he assures that these actors will be open to participating in transition projects: "*you will be surprised at how many people in positions of power will be enthused and inspired by what you are doing, and will support, rather than hinder, your efforts*" (Hopkins, 2008a: 22) and many transitioners follow him in this. Anna explains for example: *"Yes yes. I think that a company that's a little bit smart has understood it for a long time, no? A company that's a little bit smart will join this […]… Yes, I have to say, I don't fear that so much, all this opposition."* Significantly however, a contradiction sometimes sneaks into transitioners' discourse on this point. Arriving at Anna's home, for example, we saw a poster 'against' Electrabel [a big Belgian energy company] behind the window. When we asked her about that, the answer was revealing: *"Electrabel? Oh, I hate Electrabel (laughs). Yes, absolutely. Yes, it is good that you mention it. Now I know it again. Not all companies are nice."* She told us that she ordered no less than 50 of these posters, and offered us one.

Evidently, many people would consider it noble to try to think beyond oppression and conflicts. In reality, however, society is inevitably characterised by power relations, oppositions of interests, inequalities and a multiplicity of voices (Mouffe, 2002), and this is as true for the locality as for society at large. From the perspective of the political, the question is whether these divisions or forms of heterogeneity can come to the fore and be dealt with democratically, or whether they remain invisible and unarticulated. It is significant that several transitioners point to such divisive issues, without, however, knowing very well how to deal with them. The problem is that differences of opinion or power inequalities do not disappear just by ignoring them. Mouffe (2002: 5) stresses this when she states that "*the political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear simply by denying it, by wishing it away [...]*". On the contrary, misrecognising conflict threatens to make it more intense.

Furthermore, as one transitioner aptly observes, if one takes a closer look, Transition Towns seems to use a kind of "*we against them*" distinction, too. However, it is not a political, but a geographical distinction. The local (good) is presented as the opposite of the global (bad). As William

notes: "*And then a we/them kind of thinking arises, the people of my neighbourhood or my group against the rest, like that."* The point is that preferring a geographical unity (and corresponding we-them distinction) above an explicitly political one is itself already a political choice, but one which is not recognised as such in Transition Towns' discourse.

5. Conclusions

5.1. The local, the trap and the post-political

Writing on the spatial representations of the Transition Towns movement, Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson (2010) leave no doubt: Transition Towns is first and foremost a localisation movement. Similarly, Mason and Whitehead (2012: 498) argue that "*the real heart of transition is the local initiative*", and Neal (2013: 62) states that while she does "*not want to diminish the level of concern with Peak Oil and climate change it appears to be the community and local context that has so effectively popularised Transition*". In other words, localisation is the proper nodal point in Transition Towns' discourse, around which the other narratives are woven.

This focus on localisation is so strong that it sometimes overruns the movement's other concerns, which thus tend to become mere means to the actual end, localisation. Acknowledging that new discoveries, market swings or technological breakthroughs could "*alter public sentiments towards relocalisation*", Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson (2010: 603) argue for example that "*for relocalisation to remain salient*", "*[d]ifferent elements of the message will […] need to be stressed at different times".* In other words, if peak oil would somehow be overcome, other arguments will have to be developed in favour of localisation. Rather than being a new grassroots environmental movement that tries to tackle the twin problems of climate change and peak oil through building resilient local communities, as we suggested in the beginning of this article, it appears as if Transition

Towns is first and foremost a localisation movement which refers to climate change and peak oil to reinforce its case.

This diagnosis brings us back to a problem we discussed in the section on the local: localisation discourses often entail a means-ends reversal, as a result of which the real goals behind scalar strategies tend to become invisible (Born and Purcell, 2006). However, in the case of Transition Towns, something more seems to be at stake. On the one hand, several concerns of the movement, such as peak oil and climate change, are mobilised, and sometimes even instrumentalised, in favour of the goal of localisation. On the other hand, the local has no meaning in itself. The 'local' can thus be conceived as an empty signifier par excellence (Smith 1998; Glynos and Howarth, 2007), a term which acquires a substantive meaning through associations with other elements structuring the discourse around it. This diagnosis corresponds with the statement of Born and Purcell (2006: 196) that there is "*nothing inherent about scale*", but it also shows how the local can acquire a political thrust, depending on the chain of elements that are associated with it. The local trap easily manifests itself as a post-political trap: conceiving of the local as a goal in itself often relies on an obfuscation of the inevitably political process through which the local is constructed. With regard to Transition Towns, for instance, we saw how 'the local' becomes the pre-eminent nodal point of a post-political discourse as a result of its association with imaginations of harmonious, socially connected 'rural' communities, in which people are in tune with each other and with nature. These imaginations express the kind of 'good life' the movement advocates. Crucial in this regard is that not only the 'local', but also associated terms such as 'community' and 'rurality' are socially constructed in such a way as to become strongly depoliticised. Power, conflict and exclusion are clearly absent from the way the rural is depicted, for example.

Strongly related to this stress on the local is indeed the importance attached to the rural. It is precisely because the pre-eminent goal of Transition Towns is not sustainability but localisation, that Transition Towns can be seen as part of a broader movement towards a different kind of community life and a re-entanglement of social-nature relations, in other words a movement towards

ruralisation. More than anything else, the focus on the local is symptomatic for the rural character of Transition Towns.

5.2. The revenge of the political

The political and post-politics are complex notions. Assessing a movement in terms of its 'political' nature appears to be a controversial endeavour. Both North (2010a) and Urry (2011) try to do 'justice' to Transition Towns by claiming that the movement is without any doubt 'political'. However, in a certain way their diagnoses conflict with the movement's own self-understanding. Indeed, Transition Towns explicitly claims to be apolitical. The crucial question is how this apolitical self-representation should be understood, especially given the fact that the movement underscores at the same time the need to engage with 'political' actors such as local governments and city councils (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008). If one starts from a common sense understanding of politics, this seems paradoxical. However, from the perspective of the theories of the political we referred to above, Transition Towns' self-description as being apolitical is highly significant: the movement seems to be keenly aware that being apolitical is not about engaging or not with local authorities, but about thinking in terms of power, antagonistic relations between 'we' and 'them', and about struggles between opposing interests.

Interestingly, Transition Towns' attempt to be apolitical seems to be more successful than its pioneers could probably have imagined: it is even what attracts a high number of people to the movement. However, as Mouffe (2005a) perspicaciously observed, getting rid of the political dimension in social relations is probably doomed to fail. Repressing the political or rendering it invisible does not make it disappear: it is very likely to reappear, but in a different guise. At least, repressing the political will have symptomatic effects in the movement's discourse which testify to the presence of an underlying conflict. At worst, it can render a conflict more acute and intense, thereby undermining the possibility to deal with it in a democratic way. If the political is repressed, it

threatens to come back with a vengeance. Is not Transition Towns' subtle, geographic we/them distinction (the local versus the global) a manifestation par excellence of the fact that division is ineradicable? Or is the risk of xenophobia (of which we do not aim to accuse Transition Towns as such, although the movement appears to have difficulties immunising itself against it) not a typical reappearance of division under non-political forms, as Chantal Mouffe argues?

A significant example of the return of the political concerns Transition Towns' tendency to frame conflicts in psychological terms (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008): a conflict strategy is not just a political strategy with which they disagree, but a form of psychological defense or immaturity, which people should 'transcend'. Paradoxically, the 'psychology of change' which Transition Towns promotes is aimed at overcoming conflict, while, at the same time, it subtly reintroduces conflict: conflict within the self, against one's own psychological defenses. This psychologisation, whose object is often what in a more political language would be called an 'opponent', shows that something is indeed in need of being repressed: in this case, conflict strategies, and thus the political as such. The problem is that as a result, people who defend conflict strategies are no longer taken seriously, and a genuine political debate is made impossible.

This psychologisation permeates other aspects of the movement as well. The main obstacle for change being our "*addiction to oil*" (Hopkins, 2008a: 86), a whole range of "*therapeutic*" (92) tools are developed to help people in a "*supportive, friendly, encouraging and empathetic*" (92) way to deal with the "*mixed feelings*" (86) that arise when one tries to overcome "*psychological barriers*" (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008: 9) in a personal transition. Conflict thus turns back, but in a non-political fashion: as an internal conflict with one's own spontaneous inclinations, desires or psychological defenses. Each time, the conflict threatens to intensify rather than to be overcome. Several transitioners witnessed how they became upset when a divergent opinion was put aside with the suggestion that one has to work on her/himself. Others were puzzled by their own feelings of anger if situations (for example forms of collaboration with local government bodies) did not work

out the way they expected: feelings which they could not really allow, let alone articulate, and whose repression even increased their discomfort.

5.3. Politicising the local

As we already stated above: the local is not post-political as such, nor are localisation movements. What matters is how the local is discursively constructed. While many localisation movements depict the local as a site of resistance, as radical and subversive (Allen et al., 2003; Born and Purcell, 2006; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005), and thus try to turn the local into a terrain of politicisation, this is not Transition Towns' approach, or at least not the approach of the majority of its participants.

The fact that the movement nevertheless presents itself as a break with and renewal of conventional environmental discourses, and thus goes against the grain, makes Transition Towns uniquely complex, ambivalent and fascinating. On the one hand, Transition Towns would not employ words such as resistance or subversion in its self-description, as it stresses the importance of being positive, open, constructive and collaborative. On the other hand, however, transitioners nevertheless depict their movement in terms of a profound break with current society. According to Allen et al. (2003: 61), the crucial question concerning localisation initiatives is: "*are they significantly oppositional or primarily alternative?*" In other words, do they recognise the existence of conflict, power and division or are they rather focusing on building small havens without agonising existing society? In the context of current post-political tendencies this question gets an extra dimension.

Interestingly, Transition Towns contributes without any doubt to the imagination of radical future alternatives, and by doing so, it clearly goes 'against the grain'. However, it seems to lack the conceptual tools to understand this 'against'. It is part of a hegemonic struggle on how to frame and to tackle the climate crisis and on how to rebuild society, although it threatens to remain unaware of the stakes and mechanisms of the struggle it is a part of. The point is that in the end, one cannot

entirely make abstraction from this struggle: it symptomatically reappears, as we discussed above, and interestingly, exactly this reappearance can provide the starting point for a process of repoliticisation.

The fact that forms of division exist within the movement could contribute to this process of politicisation in a positive way, giving it a focus and direction. As we showed, several transitioners experience a certain unease with elements of Transition Towns' 'official' discourse, arguing that more attention should be paid to social justice issues, and advocating a more emancipatory form of localisation. The development of these germs of contestation could help to put the movement on a more solid 'political' footing: by rendering visible the disagreements and powers that permeate and surround it, it can sharpen the movement's awareness of the stakes and obstacles of its 'struggle' and contribute to rendering it more democratic and effective than it is today.

Concretely, the movement could for example pay more attention to the importance of 'utopian processes' which bring people together in an open-ended trajectory which explores and discusses ways to realise change, rather than promoting 'utopian visions' of how a more localised, rural and socially embedded society in the future could look like (see also DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). In Transition Towns' jargon, this could mean stressing the movement's intention to 'act as a catalyst' instead of focussing on 'the good life' and its related normative underpinnings. Politicising the local is then about creating a space in which a multiplicity of future socio-environmental possibilities can emerge or be taken into account. But, above all, politicising the local possibly requires adopting another relation to scale. It means working "*within a place*" without being "*about a place*" (DeFilippis, et al., 2006: 686). Indeed, there are several good reasons to take localities as starting points for movement building; but when the local becomes an end in itself, it can have strongly depoliticising consequences.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to all transitioners we met during our common, sometimes difficult but always exciting transition adventure for sharing their ideas, visions and dreams with us. Aspects of this research have been presented at several academic events, e.g. the XXIII European Society for Rural Sociology Congress in Vaasa, Finland, and several seminars in Belgium. We would like to thank all our discussants in Finland and Belgium for their thought-provoking feedback. Thanks, finally, to the three anonymous reviewers for their interesting and useful feedback on earlier versions of this article.

References

Albo, G., 2007. The Limits of Eco-Localism: Scale, Strategy, Socialism. In: Panitch, L., Leys, C. (Eds.), Socialist Register 2007. Coming to Terms with Nature. The Merlin Press, London.

Allen, P., 1999. Reweaving the food security net: mediating entitlement and entrepeneurship. Agriculture and Human Values 16, 117-129.

Allen, P., 2004. Together at the table: sustainability and sustenance in the American agrifood system. Pennsylvania State University Press, Philadephia.

Allen, P., 2008. Mining for justice in the food system: perceptions, practices, and possibilities. Agriculture and Human Values 25, 157-161.

Allen, P., FitzSimmons, M., Goodman, M., Warner, K., 2003. Shifting plates in the agrifood landscape: the tectonics of alternative agrifood initiatives in California. Journal of Rural Studies 19, 61-75.

Angus, I. (Ed.), 2009. The Global Fight for Climate Justice. Resistance Books, Londen.

Bailey, I., Hopkins, R., Wilson, G., 2010. Some things old, some things new: The spatial representations and politics of change of the peak oil relocalisation movement. Geoforum 41, 595–605.

Barry, J., Quilley, S., 2009. Transition Towns: 'Survival', 'Resilience' and Sustainable Communities: Outline of a Research Agenda. Ecopolitics Online 1(2), 14-37.

Bettini, G., 2013. Climate Barbarians at the Gate? A critique of apocalyptic narratives on 'climate refugees'. Geoforum 45, 63-72.

Bond, P., 2012. Politics of Climate Justice. Paralysis Above, Movement Below. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville.

Born, B., Purcell, M., 2006. Avoiding the Local Trap: Scale and Food Systems in Planning Research. Journal of Planning Education and Research 26, 195-207.

Brangwyn, B., Hopkins, R., 2008. Transition Initiatives Primer: becoming a transition town, city, district, village, community or even island. Transition Network, Devon.

Brown, C.J., Purcell, M., 2005. There's nothing inherent about scale: political ecology, the local trap, and the politics of development in the Brazilian Amazon. Geoforum 36, 607-624.

Campbell, M.C., 2004. Building a Common Table. Journal of Planning Education and Research 23, 341-355.

Cavangh, J., Mander, J., 2004. Alternatives to Economic Globalization. A better world is possible. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco.

Chatterton, P., Featherstone, D., Routledge, P., 2013. Articulating Climate Justice in Copenhagen: Antagonism, the Commons, and Solidarity. Antipode 45 (3), 602-620.

Clarke, N., Cochrane, A., 2013. Geographies and politics of localism: The localism of the United Kingdom's coalition government. Political Geography 34, 10-23.

Cloke, P., 2006. Conceptualizing rurality. In: Cloke, P., Marsden, T. and Mooney, P.H. (Eds.), Handbook of rural studies. Sage, London.

DeFilippis, J., 2004. Unmaking Goliath: community control in the face of global capital. Routledge, London.

DeFilippis, J., Fisher, R., Shragge, E., 2006. Neither Romance Nor Regulation: Re-evaluating Community. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 30, 673-689.

DeLind, L.B., 2006. Of bodies, place and culture: re-situating local food. Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics 19, 121–146.

Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.), 2005. The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research. Sage Publications, London.

DuPuis, M., Goodman, D., 2005. Should we go "home" to eat? Towards a reflexive politics in localism. Journal of Rural Studies 21, 359-371.

Esterberg, K.G., 2002. Qualitative Methods in Social Research. Mc Graw Hill, London.

Feagan, R., 2007. The place of food: mapping out the 'local' in local food systems. Progress in Human Geography 31, 23-42.

Glynos, J., Howarth, D., 2007. Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory. Routledge, London.

Featherstone, D., 2013. The Contested Politics of Climate Change and the Crisis of Neo-liberalism. ACME. An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies 12(1), 44-64.

Featherstone, D., Ince, A., Mackinnon, D., Strauss, K., Cumbers, A., 2012. Progressive localism and the construction of political alternatives. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 177-182.

Feenstra, G., 1997. Local food systems and sustainable communities. American Journal of Alternative Agriculture 12, 28–37.

Fisher, R., Shragge, E., 2000. Challenging Community Organizing: facing the 21st century. Journal of Community Practice 8, 1-19.

Goeminne, G., 2010. Climate Policy is Dead, Long Live Climate Politics! Ethics, Place and Environment 13(2), 207-214.

Hale, C. R., 2008. Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship. University of California Press, London.

Hinrichs, C.C., 2000. Embeddedness and local food systems: notes on two types of direct agricultural market. Journal of Rural Studies 16, 295-303.

Hinrichs, C.C., 2003. The practice and politics of food system localisation. Journal of Rural Studies 19, 33-45.

Hinrichs, C.C., Allen, P., 2008. Selective patronage and social justice: Local food consumer campaigns in historical context. Journal of Agricultural & Environmental Ethics 21, 329-352.

Hopkins, R., 2008a. The Transition Handbook. From oil dependency to local resilience. Green Books, Devon.

Hopkins, R., 2008b. The Rocky Road to a Real Transition: A Review. Available online: http://transitionculture.org/2008/05/15/the-rocky-road-to-a-real-transition-by-paul-chatterton-and-alicecutler-a-review/

Kenis, A., Lievens, M. 2014 a. Searching for 'the political' in environmental politics. Environmental Politics. Published online: 14 Jan 2014 , art.nr. 10.1080/09644016.2013.870067.

Kenis, A., Lievens, M. 2014 b. Greening the economy or economizing the green project? When environmental concerns are turned into means to save the market. Review of Radical Political Economics. (Forthcoming)

Kenis, A., Mathijs, E. 2014. Climate change and post-politics: Repoliticizing the present by imagining the future? Geoforum 52, 148-156.

Lefort, C., 1988. Democracy and Political Theory. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Marchart, O., 2007. Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Mariola, M.J., 2008. The local industrial complex? Questioning the link between local foods and energy use. Agriculture and Human Values 25, 193-196.

Marsden, T., 2006. Pathways in the sociology of rural knowledge. In: Cloke, P., Marsden, T. and Mooney, P.H. (Eds.), Handbook of rural studies. Sage, London.

Mason, K., Whitehead, M., 2012. Transition Urbanism and the Contested Politics of Ethical Place Making. Antipode 44(2), 493-516.

Mouffe, C., 2000. The Democratic Paradox. Verso, London.

Mouffe, C., 2002. Politics and passions. The stakes of democracy. CSD Perspectives, London.

Mouffe, C., 2005a. On the political. Routledge, London.

Mouffe, C., 2005b. The Return of the Political. Verso, London.

Neal, S., 2013. Transition culture: Politics, localities and ruralities. Journal of Rural Studies 32, 60-69.

North, P., 2010a. Eco-Localisation as a progressive response to peak oil and climate change: a sympathetic critique. Geoforum 41, 585-594.

North, P., 2010b. Local Money: how to make it happen in your community. Green Books, Devon.

O'Rourke, R., 2008. Transition Towns: Ecotopia Emerging? The Role of Civil Society in escaping Carbon Lock-In. Unpublished M.Sc. Dissertation, London School of Economics.

Patton, M. Q. , 2002. Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. Sage Publications, London.

Pinkerton, T., Hopkins, R., 2009. Local Food. How to make it happen in your community. Green Books, Devon.

Purcell, M., Brown, J.C., 2005. Against the local trap: scale and the study of environment and development. Progress in Development Studies 5, 279-297.

Putnam, R., 2001. Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community. Simon & Schuster, New York.

Rancière, J., 1999. Disagreement : Politics and Philosophy. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Sage, C., 2003. Social embeddedness and relations of regard: Alternative “good food” networks in south-west Ireland. Journal of Rural Studies 19, 47-60.

Schumacher, E.F., 1973. Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered. Blond & Briggs, London.

Seyfang, G., 2006. Ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption: Examining local organic food networks. Journal of Rural Studies 22, 383-395.

Seyfang, G., 2007. Growing sustainable consumption communities. The case of local organic food networks. International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy 27, 120-134.

Smith, A., 2011. The Transition Town Network: A Review of Current Evolutions and Renaissance. Social Movement Studies 10 (1), 99-105.

Smith, A.M., 1998. Laclau and Mouffe. The Radical Democratic Imaginary. Routledge, London.

Sonnino, R., 2010. Escaping the Local Trap: Insights on Re-localization from School Food Reform. Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning 12, 23-40.

Swyngedouw, E., 2007. Impossible “Sustainability” and the Postpolitical Condition. In: Krueger, R., Gibbs, D. (Eds.), The Sustainable Development Paradox. The Guilford Press, London.

Swyngedouw, E., 2010. Apocalypse Forever? Theory, Culture & Society 27, 213-232.

Swyngedouw, E., 2013. The Non-political Politics of Climate Change. ACME: An International E-Journal of Critical Geographies 12(1), 1-8.

Trapese Collective , 2008. The Rocky Road to a Real Transition: the transition towns movement and what it means for social change. London: Trapese Collective.

Urry, J., 2011. Climate Change and Society. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Van Hauwermeiren, A., Coene, H., Engelen, G., Mathijs, E., 2007. Energy life cycle inputs in food systems: a comparison of local versus mainstream cases. Journal of environmental policy & planning 9(1), 31-51.

Wall, D., 2005. Babylon and Beyond: the economics of the Anti-Capitalist, Anti-Globalist and Radical Green Movements. Pluto, London.

Winter, M., 2003. Embeddedness, the new food economy and defensive localism. Journal of Rural Studies 19, 23-32.

Woods, M., 2009. Rural geography: blurring boundaries and making connections. Progress in Human Geography 33(6), 849-858.

Žižek, S., 1999. The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology. Verso, London.

Žižek, S., 2008. Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses. http://www.lacan.com/zizecology1.htm.